



## Creating and Sustaining a Culture of Excellence - Quick Tips

*Culture is an often under appreciated force motivating behavior—and thus individual and collective performance in an academic unit. Highly ranked units are almost always characterized by a culture that fosters excellence in student mentoring, instruction, research and service to the university and beyond. Such a culture usually doesn't occur by accident: it is the product of deliberate actions and cultivation of a particular mindset by both administrative and faculty leaders. There are no standard procedures or recipes to follow: units have their own group chemistry and traditions. There are some factors that are consistently associated with units regarded as excellent, and below we describe some of these concepts with suggestions for actions that a leader might take to foster them in a unit.*

### Mindset

Are both the members of the unit and you, as the leader of that unit, excited and energized by the prospect of new unit members who achieve at a higher level than already exists?

- In recruiting and in assessing new colleagues, strive for a welcoming appreciation of those who achieve at the highest levels. The difference between widespread appreciation for excellence versus jealousy often determines the trajectory of a unit.
- Articulate the value to the unit as a whole—in reputation, in aspiration, in possibilities—when one member soars. The way a unit excels and continues to get better is to welcome members even better than those already present.
- Point out the value to colleagues of being known as a place where excellence is the 'norm,' and is welcomed.
- At the same time, keep a level playing field in terms of behavioral expectations: achieving and sustaining excellence requires maintenance of a culture that is respectful of all members of the unit.

### Collegiality

Faculty are true colleagues and mutually supportive of each other's success.

- As a leader, try to avoid personal behaviors that encourage envy, competition and strife.
- Address sources of common frustration promptly and effectively.
- Spend meaningful time getting to know each faculty member: their work, their goals and their needs.
- Encourage the same among faculty members by supporting informal gatherings; providing a venue for informal conversation in the workplace. Periodically include refreshments!
- Conduct occasional retreats away from campus which are rich in intellectually-challenging content and that also build in time for informal, unstructured "bonding" conversations.
- Foster pride in the unit around truly important accomplishments through both internal and external messaging. Celebrate milestones of accomplishments and major projects.

Such messages should both exhibit pride in the individual and contextualize achievements as improving the overall excellence of the unit and the direction of the discipline, where fitting. Try to be as inclusive as possible. Do not fall into the trap of advertising only the accomplishments of the chosen few.

- Demonstrate your pride in the unit wherever possible and give senior leaders reason to do the same.

### Create a Shared Vision of Success

The leader must lead in establishment of a vision that the faculty own.

- The opportunity to articulate a vision comes early in one's appointment – once passed, it can be lost. It can be a powerful tool for establishing your credibility as an effective leader.
- Establish a framework or goal for the process and then allow the faculty a very significant role in the effort of reaching it – it's not your vision, it must belong to the members of the unit.
- Seek opportunities to fully understand the trajectory of the discipline over a 10-15 year horizon and infuse it into the faculty dialogue. Excellent units anticipate change and seek opportunity to be a part of the new environment.





- Don't allow debilitating debate leading to winners and losers. Manage the tone of interactions forcefully if necessary, and always fairly, with the same rules applicable to all.
- Openly and regularly discuss the importance and rewards of excellence to the unit, and to each of its members; articulate how reflected glory can be both bright and uplifting.

## *Provide Necessary Resources*

- Allocate resources fairly, based on articulated principles known to all; those faculty whose work advances the reputation of the unit should receive resources based on achievement criteria and unit goals.
- Seek ways to support and enable individual faculty to garner external resources.
- Advocate for necessary facilities, space and equipment always keeping the faculty informed of the efforts that you are undertaking—invisible work is neither understood nor appreciated, especially if it requires frequent absences
- Do what you can to reduce the frictions of daily work: where possible, provide support for purchasing, reimbursements, hiring, and other items around which institutional regulations are likely require significant investments of time from those who are not intimately familiar with the systems. Clear clutter to let faculty spend as much time as possible on their teaching, research, and service.
- Recruit star faculty – although this may seem counter-intuitive a creative, highly productive individual who is willing to collaborate with lesser accomplished colleagues can have immeasurable positive impact on the excellence of the unit.

## *Reward Excellence*

- Money, salary increments and other financial rewards are essential but insufficient. Studies regularly show that productive faculty seek and will move to environments where their work is appreciated, where colleagues are welcoming, and the friction factor for getting work done is low.
- Recognize excellence with accolades, non-monetary awards and academic honors i.e., professorships, chairs, recognition in your and institutional communications.
- Insure the unit has a robust process for nominating faculty for awards by disciplinary societies and national honorary academies and societies. Devote time and energy to stimulating and supporting nominations for as many members of your unit as qualify; this includes students and staff.
- Seek advice from successful people within your unit – simply asking for advice and heeding it whenever possible is a powerful form of recognition.

## *Support Revitalization and Reinvention by Unit Members*

- Faculty careers go through cycles. Provide guidance, feedback, and encouragement for faculty to see the long arc of their careers, and help each periodically reinvent their work and incorporate new insights and directions.
- Junior faculty must branch out from their dissertation projects into new areas, and with new collaborators.
- Mid-career faculty should be helped to understand the importance of revitalization and reinvention over the long haul.
- Revitalization and reinvention should apply to teaching as well as to research interests.
- Play to the strengths of staff members in the unit: seek ways for them to grow as professionals.

